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EDTECH – A FAST-GROWING BUSINESS SECTOR **WITH THE POTENTIAL TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE**

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David Glover


Once one of the last industries to engage comfortably with the digital world, education has now become an exciting source of innovation and technological advancement. This conservative, change-averse sector is being pushed into the modern world by a new generation of tech-savvy students, teachers and businesses.

Perhaps as little as five years ago education technology was principally the domain of back office support staff in educational institutions, and was generally understood to relate to learning management systems.

Today EdTech, as it has fashionably become known, is a multi-billion-dollar global industry ranging from ambitious start-ups looking to attract smart investors to large scale initiatives from tech giants such as Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft. It embraces gaming, publishing, AI, school and industry-based learning, multiple media formats, and more.

EdTech has come of age only in recent times. When I attended the first ever New Zealand Start-Up weekend dedicated to education back in 2014, the room was populated by young coders looking for a cool project and a handful of people with educational experience. As an educational publisher at the time, I was invited to join a team that designed and produced Banqer, a financial literacy game simulation for the classroom. Banqer is now an award-winning platform used in hundreds of schools across Australia and New Zealand and its founder Kendall Flutey was recently named Young New Zealander of the Year.

When I started the first EdTech MeetUp in New Zealand in November of 2014 just 18 people came along. Today the Wellington EdTech MeetUp has 852 members and there is a national association, EdTechNZ, representing the



industry and connecting educators, technologists, and government to the debate about digital skills. Members include Google, Xero, and the Ministry of Education, alongside young entrepreneurial businesses.

I first heard the term EdTech widely used at publishing conferences in the U.S. in the mid-2000s. E-books were on the rise and the major publishers were terrified of being put out to pasture by a technology they didn't understand. Now, Pearson is a digital first company and edtech acquisitions by "content" companies in the U.S. are routine news. In 2018 edtech attracted US \$1.45 billion of investment.



THE APPEAL OF EDTECH IS MOVING OUT INTO THE BROADER BUSINESS WORLD, DRIVING AND SUPPORTING WORKPLACE LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

If America led the way, the rest of the world has quickly followed suit. From Europe to India and China the edtech industry is booming. The digitisation of our schools has spawned a whole new ecosystem of edtech companies: infrastructure businesses installing broadband, providing cybersecurity and digital identity solutions; hardware businesses offering mobile devices, tablets and interactive tools; application businesses offering new ways to enhance the teaching and learning experience.

Edtech is now a legitimate industry in its own right, attracting idealistic young workers as well as commercial professionals who obtain satisfaction from contributing to a social good. Small countries such as New Zealand have found new export opportunities as a result, with companies such as Hapara, Biozone, Booktrack, and Wendy Pye selling their digital educational products around the world.

Now I believe the appeal of edtech is moving out into the broader business world, driving and supporting workplace learning and development as the demand for workers with sophisticated digital skills accelerates. The established tech sector is leading the way with new

ways to recruit and upskill workers online who don't have the time, interest or need to follow a traditional tertiary education journey. My son, for example, routinely adds new Microsoft-accredited qualifications obtained through study online to boost his career and credibility as a cloud infrastructure engineer.

Lynda.Com, Great Courses Plus and other online providers deliver credible learning experiences and badging that are increasingly becoming a currency recognised by employers. The UK university consortium behind FutureLearn offers hundreds of specialist courses. In New Zealand you can now study for a Certificate in Education Technology – online, of course.

Industries such as construction, finance, and agriculture are increasing their investment in developing the skills of their current and future workers to meet the demands of the new technology-enabled workplaces. For example, drones now play an important role in running many of New Zealand's large farms—so a farmer now has to learn to be a drone operator. Our new health and safety legislation has driven a rapid increase in the use of virtual learning environments and simulations by the construction industry.

Across the developed world we are wrestling with issues like the future of work, the impact of automation and AI on businesses, and debating the skill needs of the next generations of the workforce that are currently still in school. The potential for education technology to make a substantial contribution should be at the heart of this conversation. Edtech can help governments overcome teacher shortages, help teachers teach more effectively, encourage self-directed learning, and enable and enhance the right learning, at the right time, just about anywhere, to just about anyone.

To grasp these opportunities, the education sector needs to step up the pace, and build better partnerships with technology firms and the wider business community. As EdTechNZ commented in a recent submission to the NZ Productivity Commission:

“The change in workplaces is moving at a more rapid and accelerating rate than the changes in the education sector, which historically finds it hard to innovate and scale new initiatives quickly in response to industry demand. These mismatches of capability and expectation are a major and growing problem.”

The challenges remain, but the prize is worth the effort. **ACO**